LOST IN THE WILDERNESS TO FIND A SELF

March 15, 1992

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Service

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Exodus 3:1-6
Luke 4:1-11

"Jesus...was led by the Spirit in the wilderness..."
-Luke 4:1 (NRSV)

There is, I submit, an elemental rhythm which moves us from life at its busiest, most human, noisiest and most hectic to solitude, to an interior life of silence, emptiness and aloneness.

There is further, I submit, a sense in which the human soul, the spirit, the self, if you will, is nurtured, grows, is discovered, in the silent emptiness; and if life does not afford silent emptiness, some wilderness, you and I are immeasurably poorer.

Annie Dillard is a writer who lives in the city and loves it, but who does her best work somewhere else. Pilgrim at Tinker Creek is a book-length journal of her reflections at her wilderness retreat in the mountains of Virginia. Dillard's descriptions of trees and insects, Tinker Creek and her daily walks constitute some very good writing and satisfying reading. But what fascinates me most, in addition to the fact that she grew up in Western Pennsylvania as I did, and remembers Pittsburgh in the same way I do from exciting annual trips to see the Pirates play, in addition to that, I am intrigued by the writer's intentional moving from city to wilderness and how full of creativity and energy that rhythm is for her.

From creekside in Virginia she wrote (something those of us who live in this place will understand):

> "I remember what the city has to offer; human companionship, major league baseball and a clatter of quickening stimulus like a rush from strong drugs that leaves you drained. I remember how you bide your time in the city, and think, if you stop to think, 'Next year, I'll start living, next year I'll start my life.'" [Pilgrim at Tinker Creek, p. 81]

When she needs to write a book or wants to write a book, she moves away from the busyness and noise of the city to Tinker Creek, or to a shed behind a house on Cape Cod... somewhere away, not permanently, but regularly. And what happens there is a deepening, a renewed awareness of who she is and what her life is about, a kind of periodic self-rediscovery, the happy result of which is some very good writing.

That is what I found myself thinking about when I began to work again on the familiar story of Jesus and his temptations in the wilderness. The story appears in the church year annually, at the beginning of the Lenten journey which follows Jesus to his cross and invites us to explore our own journeys. Most of the sermonic attention to this text revolves around what happened to Jesus in the wilderness, how he struggled with temptation and overcame it. I confess, however, that the three moral dilemmas he confronted in the desert never seemed very racy to me and barely qualified as temptation. To turn stones into loaves of bread, to achieve political power in order to establish a little justice and sanity in the world, to earn public attention in order to demonstrate credibility as a spiritual authority... The more you think about it, the better these alternatives sound, frankly, something like an action plan devised by a group of Presbyterians at a Long Range Planning Meeting.

So I've always found myself wondering what the real issue is here, and what temptation means if the result of succumbing is not moral decadence... if doing a good thing, like feeding hungry people - for the wrong reason - negates the good. And I've concluded that what is going on in this little story of Jesus in the wilderness is not simple at all: that it has to do with his very basic identity, his understanding of himself and the purpose of his life. The real struggle here is something which is a priority for every one of us, to find a self with no compromises, that rock-bottom integrity in Shakespeare:

"This above all: To thine own self be true."

I've concluded that the most interesting thing of all about this story is in the very first sentence, namely that the Spirit led him into the wilderness. He needed to be there. He was full of the Holy Spirit, and the spirit led him into the wilderness; the spirit knew who he would meet there and there was important and hard work to do before he began the adventures of his adult life.

"Wilderness" in Hebrew is the same word as desert and it can be empty, arid land, rocky plateau, desolate mountainside as well as the familiar sandy desert. [See Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible]

It's an important Biblical word and concept. Moses encountered the voice in the burning bush just west of the wilderness. Much later, in an incident reminiscent of this one, Moses spends forty days on an isolated mountaintop alone without food. Elijah

spends forty days in flight and, of course, the children of Israel wander in the wilderness for forty years and in the process evolve from a loose federation of clans into a people, a nation. Israel - in the wilderness - finds a self.

There is always mystery about wilderness. It is part of our fascination. Robert Raines was a successful and prominent pastor of a large urban church who, in the middle of it all, left one life and started all over again as the director of a retreat center in the mountains. He wrote a book about the experience and the transition and observed:

> "The wilderness is Biblical prime place for being apprehended afresh by God." [Going Home, p. 56]

And it is. It's why we head out for Michigan and Wisconsin, to mountains and seashore, to get in touch with a primal world, a world you can touch and see and feel and smell - as it always has been, a world of grandeur and majesty, a world so beautiful, only art and music and poetry can approach an adequate expression of it.

Raines quotes the poet Theodore Roethke:

> "I would unlearn the lingo of exasperation, all the distortions of malice and hatred
>
> I would believe my pain;
> and the eye quiet on the rose.
>
> I would delight in my hands, the branch singing...
> I long for the imperishable quiet at the heart of form...
>
> This ambush, this silence."
> [The Longing, Theodore Roethke, in Raines, Going Home, p. 57]

Annie Dillard describes it this way:

> "Something pummels us, something barely sheathed. Power broods and lights. We're played on like a pipe; our breath is not our own." [p. 13]

That is a given. In the wilderness God comes to Moses. In some wildernesses you and I reacquaint ourselves with the handiwork of the one who created the world and everything in it; that one whose handiwork stuns us into reverent adoration when we look at the moon and stars in the dark night sky; that one whose spirit is what we inhale and exhale as we bre;the.

When Matthew and Mark tell the story of Jesus and his temptations in the wilderness, the conclusion is that angels come and minister to him. The divine puts in an appearance; the last time

I used this text for a sermon I concluded that the wilderness is not a bad place to be because it is where angels can find you.

But not in Luke. No one comes in his version. The story ends with the devil "departing from him until an opportune time." I take that to mean that whatever happened in the wilderness would continue to happen, that the temptation or test of his integrity would reappear.

Jesus doesn't find God in this wilderness. What Jesus discovers is a self. And the way Luke tells it, God almost intentionally stays out of the picture so that Jesus can find his self alone. This wilderness is abandoned by God, not out of meanness or callousness, but precisely so the work of self-discovery can go on, because self-discovering cannot happen in the presence of your parents.

Psychology, psychiatry, psychotherapy knows that. In his popular book, The Uses of Enchantment, the late Bruno Bettleheim observed:

> "In many fairy tales being pushed out of home stands for having to become oneself. Self-realization requires leaving the orbit of home, an excruciating, painful experience fraught with many psychological dangers." [p. 79]

When you take the time to explore your own spiritual journey it is not uncommon to discover that one of the most important days in your life was the occasion when your parents, in one way or another, pushed you out, or dropped you off in some God-forsaken wilderness - like a summer camp, or turned you over to a stranger -like a kindergarten teacher, or abandoned you in front of a college dorm, or put you on a train and cheerfully waved goodbye. Nor is it uncommon to acknowledge that for many people a sense of adult selfhood appears when one's parents die.

The spirit led Jesus into that wilderness. He would not have volunteered to go on his own. It was not a particularly comfortable place to be. But it was time. It was time for him to decide who he was and what he was going to do with the rest of his life. His self was forged in the wilderness, alone.

Dutch priest and theologian, Henri Nouwen, describes this wilderness into which the spirit leads us as "the solitude of the heart," a state of being which may or may not be a physical place in an actual wilderness. Solitude of the heart is a state of silence, and introspection, a contemplative space into which we can go regardless of where we happen to be. A discipline helps of course... an actual place to be alone, without noise, distraction, conversation, and other people, even if its your bed, or desk in the early morning, or a walk alone by the lake.

The wilderness makes us nervous sometimes. One of the things I immediately notice when I have occasion to be away from

the city is how deafening the silence sounds. We are simply unconscious to the persistent, uninterrupted noise of the city. Its absence - the silence - is palpable. The settlers on the prairie - utterly dark and silent - used to beat pots and pans at night to frighten away beasts, real or imagined. And so we fill life with noise. Nouwen writes:

> "The experience is frightful as well as exhilarating because it is the great experience of being alone in the world, alone before God." [Reaching Out, p. 17]

Coming from another country, Nouwen thought Americans would go to any length to avoid being alone and quiet. He wrote:

> "When I came to this country for the first time, I was struck by the open-door life style. In schools, institutes and office buildings, everyone worked with open doors. It seemed as if everyone was saying to me, 'Do not hesitate to walk in and interrupt at any time,' and most conversations had the same open quality - giving me the impression that people had no secrets and were ready for any question ranging from their financial status to their sex life." [p. 21]

My suggestion is that if there is no wilderness experience in your life, no solitude of the heart, you are missing something.

You may be missing a self you have not known before - a you that is unique.

You may be missing creativity which you have never recognized in yourself. Artists and musicians and writers must look inside, before all else. Annie Dillard wrote a book about her craft, The Writing Life, in which she tells about where she writes:

> "Appealing workplaces are to be avoided. One wants a room with no view, so imagination can meet memory in the dark." [p. 26]

And Ranier Maria Rilke in his famous letters to a younger poet, advised his junior colleague to stop frantically cranking out poetry simply to send it to publishers.

> "You are looking outward," he advised. "There is only one way - go into yourself."

Albert Einstein said he got his best ideas while shaving in the morning - for him, a brief wilderness sojourn.

You may be missing your spiritual self if you do not go into the wilderness. Jesus went off by himself to pray, and when he

advised others, it was to go into a closet - into silence and aloneness. Our praying is almost exclusively talking, thinking up things to say to God. But there is a praying that is listening, a being silent before God, a speechless, voiceless attentiveness.

And in aloneness and solitude you may find a self that is more clear about your relationships, more capable of caring, more loving and understanding. During the enforced experiences of solitude that are part of Outward Bound and other outdoor education programs, participants - absolutely alone in the woods for a day or several days - almost always find their thinking focusing on the other people who are important to them and almost always report a profound deepening of their feelings about the relationship even though the other person may be miles away.

The late Thomas Merton, Trappist monk, who thought and wrote so perceptively about spirituality described this phenomenon:

> "It is in deep solitude that I find the gentleness with which I can truly love my brothers. The more solitary I am, the more affection I have for them." [In Merton's Journal, The Sign of Jonas, 1/2/50]

And if you have ever experienced the intimacy of love, you know the rightness of the poet Rilke's unforgettable observation:

> "Love consists in this, that two solitudes protect and border and salute each other."
> [Letters to A Young Poet, p. 59]

In the wilderness you meet your own humanity, a sense that this is the day the Lord has made, this day given to you to live fully, to treasure and to use this one and only life which began with your birth and will end with your death. In the wilderness you meet your mortality - and perhaps that is why we are not always comfortable there.

In the wilderness Jesus encountered his vocation. He did so by contemplating three alternative ways to live out his sense of God's call, each of them involving a small compromise of his integrity. It was vocational training for him. For three years he was faced with similar decisions and at the end, the real test.

The power of his story, which we have heard since childhood, changes focus as we become older, and live more and know more. And for me these days, the compelling dimension is my sense that he did not have to go to Jerusalem. He did not have to do the things and say the things he did there. He did not have to die, just a small compromise, a word or two in the right time and place would have mollified his persecutors and satisfied his critics. He could have, with a very understandable and very

realistic word or two, given Pilate the reason he needed not to crucify him.

The issue will, pray God, never be so dramatic for you and me. But there is a sense in which we are put to the test every day, responsible for making decisions, entering relationships, doing business... deciding for whom to vote, and which values and hopes you want and will stand for and pay for, deciding to which causes we will give ourselves, affirming who we are and what our lives are about... decisions that in one way or another reflect, or do not reflect, God's love and God's will for the world and God's purpose for our lives.

The moment comes without warning, with little time to reflect and how we face the test will depend on whether or not there is a self - in here - discovered, nurtured, lived out in some solitude, some wilderness.

God seems to abandon Jesus in the wilderness. That's how it feels sometimes. The truth is that it is precisely when we feel abandoned, that we begin to discover who we are, that we find a self; a self - loved into being by God, a self - capable of loving others, a self - created for full and joyful life.

So may you find, or may the spirit lead you... into some wilderness, some solitude of heart... this ambush... this silence.

Amen.

+ + + + + + + + + + + + +

God of all gentleness, in these days of Lent, lead us once again into the wilderness, to contend with temptations, to know ourselves, and to listen for your word of love and courage, in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.